# Dialogue: A Promising Vehicle to Steer Transformative Local Change towards More Sustainable Communities?

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**Abstract:** This paper engages in a reflection on how, and under what conditions, dialogue can contribute to local transformative change towards climate neutrality, based on the case of the German city of Marburg which has engaged in a collaborative governance process to steer climate mitigation since 2019. The research findings are drawn from the work of the 2020-created Franco-German Forum for the Future. The project seeks to increase dialogue among states, citizens, and the economy to foster learning, mutual understanding and ultimately collaboration for an inclusive socio-ecological transition. Hence, dialogue plays a central role in both objectives and the methodology in our work with the city of Marburg, based on a collaborative action-research approach. Central to the Forum's approach are different forms of tailored dialogic engagements, including reflection sessions with our research partners, interviews and theme-based peer-to-peer dialogues between various local initiatives to create space for experience-sharing and knowledge

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transfer. In this paper, we show how dialogue can create space for self-reflection among stakeholders to recognise some of the structural barriers of designing and implementing local climate policy. Findings offer insights into how multi-stakeholder exchanges can ease conflict in working relationships, by making divergent role understandings and institutional constraints more explicit. We also reflect on the framework conditions dialogue requires to enable collaborative implementation of local policies.

**Keywords:** Dialogic spaces, Collaborative governance, Climate mitigation, Societal transformation

## Introduction

Our societies today are facing 'wicked' problems such as climate change, pandemics and rising social and economic inequality. These problems can only be solved by massive collaborative and co-creative efforts of governments, citizens, economic actors, and knowledge institutions (Mazzucato 2021; Roberts 2004). Yet, so far, collaboration has been stifled by traditional forms of knowledge creation, a culture of thinking in 'silos' of the respective sectors, and a lack of dialogue. Secondly, socio-ecological transformation does not happen in board rooms at the national level (alone). Local territories, cities, and rural areas are at the forefront of social change. Local municipalities and their citizens experience the consequences of these wicked problems, such as local flooding or healthcare challenges in times of Covid-19. They are also key actors in leading social transformation.

The Franco-German Forum for the Future (the Forum hereafter), which the research findings this article reflects upon are drawn from, seeks to address some of the problems above and to catalyse just ecological and social transitions 'around a bottom-up approach focusing on local/regional initiatives' (Article 22, of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle), to then transmit the learnings from the ground to national policymakers. One of the centrepieces of the Forum's approach is transformative research. Transformative research seeks to generate new ways of thinking and doing from the bottom up. The approach adopted to generate insights into what works in practice focuses on collaborative efforts with civil society and local governments as research partners.

This article serves as a moment of reflection on the transformative research agenda's potential to strengthen local governance processes towards socio-ecological transition, with a specific focus on our collaborative action-research partnership with the city of Marburg. Marburg was one of the first cities in Germany to declare a 'climate emergency' in 2019 and has developed, with the participation of its citizenry, a local climate action plan. Therefore, the small university city in Western Germany, not far from Frankfurt/Main, can be considered an interesting case study of climate-policy

activism to achieve climate neutrality by 2030. Our project has engaged with the city of Marburg since December 2020 in terms of both collaborative action research and curated peer-to-peer dialogues (see Methodology for details).

The paper illustrates how, and under what conditions, dialogue can support transformative change towards local climate neutrality. To do so, the first part introduces the conceptual discussions around participation, power, and dialogue. The second part spells out more explicitly the collaborative action research methodology of the Forum, which also formed the basis for data collection and analysis for this article. The third part focuses on an analysis of existing dialogic spaces in Marburg. We show how the government-citizen dialogue has been both impactful and extremely challenging thus far, and explore the underlying reasons, of how initial dialogic engagements created enormous expectations that could not be followed up by local government. This led to a sense of voicelessness and disengagement among civil society actors. The final part analyses how creating dialogic space, as part of our work, can harness potential to overcome some of the described shortcomings, allowing stakeholders in Marburg to step out of their own bubble.

Considering that research on dialogue to date has mostly focused on the realm of education, such as classroom interactions (see Lambirth 2015), the findings on dialogue presented here widen the scope to scholarship on dialogue in public administration and governance. Our research speaks to the underexplored link between authentic dialogue and functional collaborative governance models in steering social transformation at local level.

## Conceptual backdrop: participation, power, and the role of dialogue

A growing body of literature focuses on how participatory and collaborative modes of governance can improve environmental outcomes of public decision-making. Outcomes are likely to be more innovative and sustainable, if they are based on broader support of citizens and the private sector (Lindner et al. 2021; Mazzucato 2021). Innovation commonly happens through a change of perspective, which may spark new ways of thinking (Newig et al. 2018, 270). Interactions with actors outside one's own network can facilitate such a process (Hawkins et al. 2018). The former provides stakeholders, defined as people or institutions with shared interests in solving a problem (Künkel et al. 2019), with external sources and extensive knowledge, thereby alleviating resource dependency and transaction costs.

However, critical observers have noted that there still exists a gap 'between normative positions promoting citizen engagement and the empirical evidence and understanding of what difference citizen engagement makes (or not) to achieving stated

goals' (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010, 9). Similarly, other research has found that institutionalised participatory spaces could be experienced by citizens as silencing, where their voices were recorded, but 'not forming or impacting the foundation upon which the vision for the future was built' (Vainio 2020, 11). Thus, structured participation in local policymaking and implementation can lead to a sense of voicelessness among civil society members when political commitment to involvement and co-creation is not followed up by action (Bianchi et al. 2021; Cornwall 2008; Lima 2020; Rowe et al. 2005, Quick 2021). Schultz et al. (2008, 684) noted in this regard that 'dialogues may become a hollow pretext for inclusion and participants might feel hijacked and manipulated unless they feel there have been genuine attempts of inclusive process and to challenging governance and power relations'. One of the standing explanations for this potentially silencing effect of deliberative or participatory spaces is that they are embedded in a policymaking process which is characterised by unequal power relations (Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Brady, 1999; Mansbridge 1986). As we will show in section three of this article, the respective context of power circumscribes the possibilities of deliberation of actors within those spaces. Thus, even those regarded as the more powerful, such as municipal officials, are constrained by the institutional set-up, competencies and mandates they have or may not have. As such, government officials can be described as people 'through whom power is passed or who are important in the fields of power relations' (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, 247). Yet, they do not always hold the presumed power within that specific participatory space, that is frequently ascribed to them by civil society.

That is why the Forum is interested in the concrete experiences of participatory and collaborative practices and the challenges encountered by both, municipal and civil society actors. It gathers perspectives from the field, supporting processes of reflection of actors' respective positions, of double loop learning, of revising decisions in light of new experience, and identifying hindering and facilitating factors for social innovation and ecological transition across local initiatives.

Central to the Forum's approach, from which the research findings presented here are drawn, is dialogic engagement with our research partners, considering the two facets of dialogue commonly discussed in the literature (see Escobar 2009): (i) dialogue as a form of collaborative, non-polarised discourse, that focuses on social learning, through unpacking assumptions, fostering of deep inquiry and inclusion of different perspectives, (ii) as a relational and safe space, which allows stakeholders to develop a common ground for action. The approach builds on the assumption that such dialogic engagement fosters the development of communities of mutual learning and practice, defined as groups of actors who share a common concern, and de-

velop a shared repertoire of resources, or tools to address a problem through joint activities, information sharing and regular discussion (Wenger 1998).

As such, dialogue allows for exploring alternative problem framings and discussing experiences, values, and worldviews underlying different perspectives (Garard et al. 2018) to create a common ground for action (McCoy and Sully 2002). In that sense, dialogue has the potential to improve policy implementation, as the latter often remains challenged by inadequate representation of diverse perspectives, entrenched conflicts among stakeholders, a lack of legitimacy of decisions, or technically and politically unworkable outcomes (Quick 2021), when implicit assumptions of action are not rendered transparent. As noted by Innes and Booher (2003, 41) 'failure to recognize and explore interdependence' of stakeholders can be 'a central obstacle to collaboration', as the former constitutes 'the glue for their continuing work' (ibid, 42). We consider dialogue a mediating force in this context. Dialogue is conceptualised herein as 'an open-ended conversation in which participants strive to understand their experiences, languages, and ways of thinking or arguing' (Escobar 2009, 61). All in all, dialogue can be seen as a catalyst to engage in social learning processes, especially on complex and disputed issues such as environmental governance, where best policy solutions are not obvious. As Jager et al. (2019) argued, environmental governance outcomes are mediated by social learning processes within networks, as a form of capacity-building.

How, and under what conditions, the dialogic method can enhance mutually beneficial exchange between stakeholders of different sectors involved in local climate action is the subject of our analysis. We show how dialogue, if curated, can be central to local climate governance by bringing actors together, and by bridging conflicts of interest through transparency and trust between all parties involved. As a safe place for interaction, genuine dialogue can be seen as a pre-condition for collaborative policy development and implementation to emerge.

Our approach follows the premise that dialogic spaces are opened and driven by creative tension between different viewpoints and perspectives. Dialogue enables 'possibility thinking' (see Wegerif 2007) and problem structuring (Schultz et al. 2018) when conducted under certain framework conditions. Space here can be understood not only as a physical space of encounter, but also as the freedom and flexibility in how processes are conducted (see Rabadjieva and Terstriep 2021). Our methodological approach of collaborative action research, including the peer dialogues, thus follows the idea Wegerif (2013) described in his work on dialogic spaces, which serve to (i) *open*, or to enable shared spaces of exchange, to *widen*, or to bring in new voices with multiple perspectives, and *deepen*, thus to invite shared reflection and to challenge participants' assumptions.

## Methodology

The findings presented here are drawn from the collaborative action research of the Forum, which, given its mandate, follows an explicitly normative and interventionist agenda (cf. Fazey 2018; Meisch 2020). The project design is based on three pillars of action. Firstly, through collaborative action research with selected local initiatives, it seeks to find inspirational examples of co-creation and collaboration at the local level to address pressing ecological and social problems. It thus learns from already existing examples or 'real laboratories of social innovation' about enabling and hindering factors in practice. Secondly, through curated, tailored, and theme-based peer-to-peer dialogues between French and German local initiatives it seeks to create space for experience sharing, inspiration, and knowledge transfer between regions and countries. Thirdly, in a so-called 'French-German Resonance Room' the Forum seeks to bring the analysis, inspiration, and lessons learned of the local level to the attention of a mix of local and national level experts and policy makers, such that they can, informed and inspired by local-level experience, formulate recommendations for national decision makers.

The Forum's collaborative action-research approach allows for the development of research questions together with local partners and for mirroring and jointly discussing research findings in regular meetings. We also developed, in collaboration with the city, a study on the challenges and opportunities of climate governance in Marburg which subsequently has been discussed widely with stakeholders in the city ranging from the mayor, politicians, and members of civil society.

Dialogue, as practice and an opportunity to learn from, is embedded in the Forum's methodology in a three-fold manner: 1) in the form of reflection sessions as part of the collaborative action-research process; 2) in the form of the curated peer-to-peer dialogues; and 3) in the form of catalysing dialogue at national level on local solutions, and challenges. The empirical data we collected in this first phase of the project relies on the first two areas of intervention. It lends itself to an analysis of how dialogue, as a method to create safe space for exchange, can foster cross-sector collaboration between local authorities and civil society to enhance local climate action.

Within this framework our empirical data collection also relied on classic qualitative and ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and informal conversations from field research on site and partly digitally, semi-structured interviews, expert interviews, review of published primary sources (e.g., press articles, minutes and reports of the city of Marburg, position papers of civil society voices, practical examples from other German and French municipalities, and legal documents) and secondary literature (peer-reviewed and grey literature), as well as collaborative

methods of action research. A full-time field researcher has been dedicated to the process as well as a part-time local coordinator, who is embedded in the social fabric of Marburg city and acts as connector to local actors.

The findings of this article are based on 29 stakeholder interviews with representatives of local politics, public administration, especially those developing policies on climate action and citizen participation, and civil society from a diversity of climate protection initiatives based in Marburg and its surroundings (ranging from local mobility-sharing projects to national advocacy work on zero emissions), and 12 collaborative digital (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and on-site working sessions between the Forum and Marburg's local government responsible for the local climate action plan. We selected them based on their expertise, primarily following a snowball sampling approach. For the voices presented here, we aimed at maintaining a balance between municipal staff and civil society, taking into account the diversity of voices within civil society itself. Considering the focus of our study, we did not include interviews with local economic actors.

We also analysed material from participation in a moderation training hosted by the Forum, which came about because local actors in Marburg (civil society, public administration, local political actors) expressed interest in learning about innovative forms of facilitating dialogic exchanges within a multi-stakeholder setting. Additionally, the transcript of three curated peer dialogues with other initiatives, aiming at introducing new ways of thinking from comparable local contexts, were analysed: two peer dialogues with municipal and civil society representatives from the city of Konstanz in Southern Germany, as well as the cities of Erlangen and Lindau, and one dialogue with the French city of La Rochelle. Such two-hour sessions engaged different local initiatives with one another, based on participants' feedback during preliminary interviews on what issues they would like to focus on in the exchanges.

We consider collaborative action methods as particularly adapted to understanding complex policy problems and to developing practical solutions together with local actors (Renn 2021). Indeed, the newly formed government of Marburg took up many of the outcomes of our joint reflection sessions and embedded them in their coalition agreement, published in November 2021. However, as with any involved research, our transformative approach comes with methodological challenges of keeping a necessary analytical distance (Gürtler and Rivera 2019). Our mixing of roles as actively engaged sparring partners and distanced researchers can create both confusion and unrealistic expectations among research participants and called for a continuous re-negotiating and clarifying of our position in the field. For instance, a member of the local government perceived the Forum as responsible for evaluation and accompanying research of the climate action plan and exchange formats with

climate activists, which we did not conceive as part of our mandate. We constantly saw ourselves confronted with the limitations of our role, regarding questions around how much activism our action research should entail (also see Fazey 2018).

A further challenge was constituted by the fact that most formats of intervention happened online due to the unfolding COVID pandemic. This proved to be a challenge on the research side, as it was difficult to establish trust and a collaborative working relationship and it proved harder to recruit research participants. Virtual onboarding of initiatives led to longer time-lags and some potential blind spots regarding the diversity of stakeholders to consider. However, online formats offered interesting opportunities, especially for the peer-to-peer dialogues. As time investments proved to be lower and geography no limit to participation, a bigger variety of actors was enabled to participate. The reliance of technological tools such as breakout sessions also allowed for more intimate and in-depth formats for dialogue than plenary sessions. A mix of formats, between small- and large-group discussions, allowed more participants to speak (also see Garard et al. 2018).

## Government-citizen dialogue in Marburg: Lessons from the ground

This part of the paper delves into our local case study, illustrating the structural barriers and enablers of dialogic engagement, including a reflection on some of the conditions needed for genuine exchange and collaboration to happen. Less explored in public administration scholarship, our findings reveal how authentic dialogue on a level playing field can be considered key in making collaborative governance models work, as it can, for instance, reduce coordination problems and communication deadlocks.

Dialogue, as instrument to foster cross-sectorial collaboration on local climate mitigation, has been at the heart of Marburg's project since its outset. The development and implementation of local climate policies have been characterised by strong 'bottom-up' civil society activism, on the one hand, and a subsequent political commitment from the top to reach climate neutrality by 2030, and in collaboration with civil society, on the other. This stands in contrast to other German municipalities which mandated research institutes to develop policy initiatives and to support them in their implementation.

Nevertheless, despite firm commitment by all stakeholders, Marburg's government-citizen dialogue has been challenging thus far. Aspirations of inclusiveness and intentional collaboration did not always transpire into practice. As we explore in the following, (i) formal spaces of participation curated by the municipal administration

aggravated conflict and expectations rather than promoting collaboration; and (ii) such conflict was harnessed by the institutional framework in which dialogic processes were embedded. It was therefore not, as is commonly presumed by actors in the field, a conflict of interest between civil society and administration. In many ways we found that civil society, politicians and administrative staff shared similar goals. Yet, conflict was triggered by procedural and structural factors. Synergies of interest did not transform into productive formalised working relationships so far. How can this be explained?

First, Marburg's local climate policy could be characterised by a 'strong coalition of the willing' which committed to collaborative governance to reach local climate neutrality by 2030, repeatedly expressed by all sides. As a Marburg-based participant highlighted in a peer-to-peer dialogue we organised:

> We all want climate protection. (...) We are not here to somehow slow one another down, but we want to work together.

Yet, despite their mutual commitment, joint action could not be followed through; dialogue engagement stopped after an initial phase of co-creation. In more detail, the process of declaring a state of 'climate emergency' in 2019 was initiated bottom-up by civil society, including the local Fridays for Future movement, and subsequently endorsed top-down, by the Lord Mayor and (the majority of) the city council. In the following, local administration organised several workshops with and for civil society representatives to jointly develop a local climate action plan (CAP), as an operational tool defining specific climate mitigation measures. In line with descriptions elsewhere in the literature (Yalçın and Lefèvre 2012), such a co-creative, dialogue-based approach initially mobilised civil society. The participatory workshops were perceived as 'highlights' by all parties, the mayor, administrative staff and civil society.

However, the civil society's initial 'euphoria' turned into severe disappointment when the co-creatively designed process suddenly came to a halt. While civil society representatives had compiled an overview of about 600 ideas for action following the joint workshop in late 2019, and transmitted them to the dedicated administrative unit, they felt cut off from all communication and left in the dark for the following months. Partially due to the Covid pandemic, the respective working unit shielded itself off to write up the local CAP. But this was not the only reason. Administrators felt that any further participation of civil society was 'unrealistic' due to time constraints. Interestingly, the time constraints had been imposed by civil society itself in their push for a speedy formulation of the CAP over 6 months, as part of the declaration of the climate emergency. Municipal officials did not have the administrative capacity required for long-term implementation of participatory methods (see

Emerson et al. 2012 for similar argument). This stifled the development of a structured follow-up for collaboration and exchange. Therefore, structured dialogue with the interested public on developing the CAP remained a one-off event in form of two workshops.

Nevertheless, city administrators expressed commitment to continue some form of dialogue by requesting to be part of civil society's organised gathering, the meetings of the so-called 'Klimabündnis', the local climate alliance. Monthly exchanges developed but tended to remain void of genuine exchange on a 'level playing field'. This was partially due to the fact that civil society members mainly asked questions and the city was in an answering role. The time for exchange was also limited, as administrators could only be present for the first 30 minutes of the meeting 'as guests'. This all happened in a digital format.

Due to this format of exchange, we could observe that despite mutual commitment, dialogic spaces remained conflictual and confrontational and did not allow for the development of a mutually balanced exchange. Representatives from both sides described their relations as 'competing' and 'playing against each other', while at the same time emphasising their respective will to collaborate. On the one hand, administrators felt misunderstood in terms of their respective scope of action. As a local government representative explained:

> This is something that is often difficult to understand within civil society: which levels in the political system actually have what competences. Cities are often expected to do a lot of things that we unfortunately cannot necessarily regulate by law.

Administrators perceived local activists as always asking for more than they could realistically deliver 'and pointing the finger' instead of 'taking responsibility in implementing' the plan. On the other, civil society interviewees described how they felt 'not heard' and 'excluded'. They alluded to feelings of being consulted but not involved, as their ideas were not taken forward. As a result, civil society representatives perceived the local CAP as belonging 'to the municipality', rather than it being of joint ownership. The former expressed how they had lost interest in the 'city's project'.

Moreover, actors only realised over the course of our fieldwork that they may have different understandings of their roles within the policy implementation process but were not aware of their diverging views at the outset of their formal cooperation. While the municipality wanted to invite civil society to contribute at specific moments, being offered to express their views on well-delineated questions, the latter

perceived this as an 'alibi role' and asked for a co-constitute role instead. As one of our interviewees expressed:

> The work is currently done by the city alone.... Even when events take place: It is then 2h [...] That is not enough.

Considering their divergent expectations, the observed formats of participation engendered frustrations, a loss of credibility and trust among parts of civil society, who subsequently disengaged from the process. As discussed in the first section, civil society members felt a sense of voicelessness since the expressed political commitment was not followed up by action (see Schultz et al., 2008).

But what civil society perceived as a lack of ambition could be traced back to a wide range of administrative constraints. While members of civil society saw municipal actions as being 'characterised by wishes rather than by actual action', and the CAP itself as 'technical' and 'lacking vision', the working unit responsible for its implementation felt 'overburdened' and 'overworked'. As noted by Quick (2021), stakeholders may interpret the same events or processes differently according to their own world views and internal working logics. In Marburg, only one single administrative unit, composed of four staff and without any transversal competence, was charged with the implementation of local climate policy and the coordination of the multi-actor process. A governance structure operating in silos and vertically, each in their own specialised field, rather than a transversal steering unit, as well as a lack of mandate at the municipal level further obstructed effective process management. As one member of the local administration explained in one of the peer dialogues:

> People expect so much from the cities and municipalities, which however is by law not even within our regulatory mandate.

What civil society perceived as 'passivity', could be traced back to lack of time, human resources and mandate on the administrators' side. Unable to continue the exchange with external actors due to capacity constraints, municipal actors kept processes closed to 'protect themselves from unrealistic expectations' and to limit their already 'unrealistic' workload. Or, as expressed by one of the city officials: 'We do not really want to, but we ought to do this.' Maintaining momentum in implementing a local CAP effectively requires administrative capacities to act (see Yalçın and Lefèvre 2012).

Interestingly, however, while stakeholders seemed insufficiently equipped to create and maintain formal dialogue spaces, informal dialogue appeared to lead to functional working relations. As interviewees alluded to, local government and civil soci-

ety representatives continued to 'meet in the street', exchanging ideas over a 'pint of beer'. As one interviewee vividly described:

> The Marburg climate scene is super-well networked. Everyone knows one another, it's a bit like a small village; there is a lot of overlap between the different groups of people. [...] Formal organigrams are one thing, but it is a lot about who knows how. That's also a reality to consider.

Such informal cooperation may constitute an opportunity to harness mutual understanding. As Engels (2008) noted, less structured and rigid modes of participation allow for flexible and problem-centred interactions, which are focused on tangible results when negotiating different positions. Such informal conversations allow for room for participants to vent their frustrations about an issue, to tell personal stories that illustrate how they feel and why, which McCoy and Sully (2002) consider key in creating authentic dialogue.

In sum, we could observe how dialogic formats could become disempowering and disconnect actors if not embedded in a long-term strategy of participation within a collaborative governance structure (see Ansell and Gash 2007). While willingness and commitment did not lack, maintenance of genuine, participatory dialogue became obstructed by lack of administrative resources and skills to foster transparency and openness on processes and roles which manifested itself in perceptions of conflicting interests (also see Rabadjieva and Terstriep 2021). Structurally induced lack of resources and ultimately power, prevented actors 'sharing information and demonstrating competency, good intentions, and follow-through' (Chen 2010). In short, similar what McCoy and Sully (2002) noted in their research, the format of isolated events, not giving equal voice to all stakeholders involved, aggravated conflict rather than creating mutual understanding.

## The role of dialogic engagement in catalysing transformative change

Considering the challenges described above, this second part reflects on the role dialogue itself can play in catalysing transformative change, helping actors to shift perspective. To do so, it engages with our research methodology applied in Marburg, which aims at creating a safe space for mutual learning and self-reflection.

Part of what our transformative research approach aimed to achieve was to overcome a methodological individualist lens, and to encourage actors to think beyond their individual motivations and actions towards a more systematic lens of what shapes their joint efforts in the policy implementation process. Here, dialogic engagement

could be seen as an opportunity to challenge implicit assumptions through our intervention as external partners. For instance, our reflection sessions with stakeholders contributed to making the described diverging perceptions of roles and responsibilities explicit. As briefly alluded to earlier, our field researchers, working with Marburg's local administration through methods of collaborative action research, engaged in continuous informal dialogue with diverse stakeholders, which could be considered as *opening dialogic spaces*. Once we established collaborative working relationships with city administrators, dialogue was *deepened* by promoting a joint reflection on different perspectives and voices (see Wegerif 2013). This included regular working sessions with the dedicated unit working on climate mitigation within the city administration as well as with local political representatives, to reflect together on our learnings from the interviews we conducted.

We mirrored our observations of the shortcomings of the city's current climate governance structure *to open dialogic spaces*, helping them to render their own implicit assumptions and biases transparent. An interesting example in this regard concerns perceptions of civil society in their role in local climate activism. While local administrators tended to refer to different climate activist groups as *one* civil society, considering the Climate Alliance as their 'representative' which can speak with one voice, interviewees from civil society repeatedly pointed out their internal divisions. They highlighted the heterogeneity in positions, between the older and '*less* radical' generation of climate activists engaged in local policymaking, and the younger activists, turning to alternative forms of protest, to 'exert political pressure on the administration and politics'. This constituted a new insight for city officials, who recognised that 'there are different ideas and proposals and views, and so on *within* the group' (italics added by authors). As noted by Newig et al. (2018, 281), intensive face-to-face dialogues can help participants to discover their different perspectives, capability, needs, and preferences.

Additionally, peer dialogues, as curated exchanges between local initiatives from different parts of Germany and France can be conceptualised as means to *widen dialogic spaces*. Focus of the curated conversations with actors of comparable local contexts were different models of collaborative climate governance connecting administrations and civil society. The dialogues built on one another: the first curated exchange brought together stakeholders from local government and civil society in Marburg and in Konstanz. It revealed diverging understandings of institutional mandates and roles but also the expressed willingness for cooperation between the different parties. The second dialogue, which brought in external actors from additional municipalities in Germany, sought to address concrete cases of collaboration between civil society and local administrations, allowing an exploration of how an enabling institutional framework of collaborative governance could look. Lastly, the

third dialogue the Forum organised brought in the view of the French city of La Rochelle, which had already created a model of collaborative governance. How can the potential impact of creating such dialogic spaces for a diverse range of perspectives and voices on strengthening collaborative climate governance be described?

A mirror perspective from outside their own setting gained during these dialogues allowed Marburg-based actors to question their ways of thinking and interacting with one another, helping them to recognise the structural dimensions of their conflictual working relationships. In other words, we noted a change in attitude among stakeholders throughout our observational fieldwork period, moving away from talking of interpersonal relations as primary source of conflict. For instance, at the end of one of our peer-to-peer dialogues between Marburg and another German city of similar size, actors reflected on the need for a transparent conflict culture where 'we can poke at each other' to 'get to the critical points, and then we can also manage the work [together]'.

However, dialogue requires negotiation and facilitation skills, to mediate potential conflict and stimulate discussion and equal participation (Garard et al. 2018; Sippel and Jenssen 2009). As Innes and Booher (2003) noted, a facilitator role enables participants to feel safe and comfortable. To date, the Climate Alliance plenaries in Marburg, as one of the only existent collaborative working formats, have been described as 'chaotic', 'confusing' and 'unstructured', and often remained without a chair leading the session. As a result, sessions tended to take an antagonistic character, and did not allow for explicating diverging assumptions on roles and responsibilities, which, in turn, led to their conflictual understandings as 'polar opposites' (also see Schultz et al. 2018). While a joint implementation process of the local climate action tool can act as a tool to develop shared knowledge and mutual trust (Yalçın and Lefèvre 2012), it needs certain framework conditions. Such include clear rules, and transparency on roles and processes (Gunton 2003; Lima 2020), which, as described have been partially lacking so far.

This is something that stakeholders in Marburg became aware of and started to reflect critically during our fieldwork period, the phase of *deepening dialogic engagement*. Firstly, they started raising questions on 'how' to design dialogic exchanges within our peer dialogues. Here, a municipal representative pointed to the existing 'methodological blindness' and a 'lack of creativity' in formats. They identified their need to get training in methods of facilitation and moderation to strengthen their collaboration towards reaching carbon neutrality in the municipality. The Forum thus organised training on facilitation techniques (based on ideas of the 'Art-of-Hosting' method) with representatives from Marburg and other partners. In this context, a participant from the city's local administration noted that through the

training 'our awareness of lack of communication and overheard messages has increased.' Secondly, the unit responsible for climate has begun to rethink its strategy for engaging with civil society and other stakeholders and is developing at the time of writing models, such as a citizen convention for a consistent dialogue and participation. As one of the municipal representatives stated, 'without collaborating with you we would not have prioritised the theme of climate governance'.

In sum, we have observed that what at the outset of fieldwork appeared to be lip service turned into concrete attempts to collaborate more consistently. City administrators became outspoken on inviting civil society representations to actively participate in shaping local climate governance. In the words of a city official at a Climate Alliance plenary:

> I would like to invite you to reach out to me, so we can have a lively exchange.

Subsequently, Marburg-based stakeholders started working on a new framework for exchange 'to find a common language' as basis for inclusive dialogues (see Innes and Booher 2004). Such common understandings, even of key notions, appeared to have been missing thus far. For instance, in interviews city administrators had tended to focus on technical, small-scale solutions to reduce $CO_2$ emissions, while local climate activists urged a socio-ecological transformation towards a global 'post-fossil society', taking a more encompassing view. City officials have now realised that it takes both technical work on the ground and continued negotiations about joint understandings of climate neutrality.

The city administration also started collaborating with citizens on specific issues rather than lamenting a lack of communication and the need to join forces in abstract terms. One example is civil society representatives' and municipal administrators' joint engagement in a city-wide competition to incentivise business and homeowners to install solar panels on their roofs. Their changing thinking on engaging with one another comes through in how they referred to their collaboration as 'teamwork' or 'Team Marburg'. Their close collaboration impacted their overall collaborative working relations insofar as they gained trust in each other and an understanding for each other's perspectives.

Our case study confirms other research findings (Littleton and Mercer 2013, Wegerif 2013), on how reflective dialogue can only be functional in developing a shared working culture if it leads to a mutual understanding and trust, while also raising acceptance of decisions. To do so, it requires continuity, multiple forms of engagement on concrete actionable issues, active listening and genuine, content-fo-

cused exchange (see McCoy and Sully 2002; Newig et al. 2018). In other words, verbal commitment should not be undermined by action.

## Concluding reflections

Implementing local policies on complex problems, such as tackling climate change locally, requires joint learning, experimentation and reflection on how to address the different issues associated with delivering them. This is increasingly being considered a central building block of innovation-oriented policymaking (Lindner et al. 2021). Dialogue can serve as a catalyst of reflection and ease situations of perceived conflict of interest between the stakeholders involved in shaping local ecological transitions; by making divergent role understandings and institutional constraints on capacities or mandates explicit. However, collaborative dialogue, as applied to controversial public issues, and including many stakeholders with different knowledge, skills and capacities, still remains at an experimental stage (Innes and Booher 2003).

Considering its potential, this article explored when dialogue can support collaborative governance arrangements, and under what conditions it turns dysfunctional. As the Marburg example illustrated, being involved is not equivalent to having a voice (also Cornwall 2018; Marzuki 2017 et al.). Institutional power structures, mandates, resources and capabilities (or the lack thereof) can determine whether participatory dialogue allows citizens to have a voice or not. It is crucial that these structures are known and reflected, which in turn requires building long-term investment, time and resource capacities and certain soft skills, including knowledge of facilitation and conflict settlement. If these are lacking, we commonly observe a disjuncture between words and action, and a breakdown of any formal dialogic engagement.

Yet, there is no one, clear recipe for authenticity in dialogue. As Escobar (2009, 56) notes, creating space for dialogic communication 'is an evolving craft rather than a fixed technique'. Certain framework conditions are necessary nevertheless, including equal participation, transparent roles and processes, and continuity. Our case study also pointed to the significant role of informal dialogue. Based primarily on personal connection and empathy, it can support actors in developing a mutual understanding for their roles and constraints. A multiplicity of voices, including from other localities, can further deepen such a reflective exchange, allowing for a mirror perspective on one's own setting.

Overall, dialogue can help municipal officials to see structural commonalities between their cities and contributed to shifting their focus from 'personalities' to structural issues. The case of local climate governance in Marburg allows conclusions to be drawn into how dialogue, once curated and embedded into collaborative gov-

ernance structure, can enhance mutual learning within communities of practice. Over the course of our fieldwork, we not only noted changes in individual behaviour and attitudes, but also new networks and working collaborations forming – which supported institutional changes towards a new local climate governance structure. Ultimately, dialogic spaces may allow for a shared understanding of local experiences and knowledge of all involved stakeholders to emerge from the bottom-up. The latter has potential to reshape policy implementation, by impacting the ways in which policy practitioners understand their role within the institutional environment they operate in.

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